A Progressive Teacher Evaluation System

By George Murdoch

The literature on evaluation in English Language Teaching (ELT) has little to say about the development of appropriate teacher evaluation systems for major institutional language programs. The purpose of this paper is to provide a set of ideas and suggestions that can enable a program team to set about creating evaluation procedures that relate to the needs of teachers in a particular institutional setting. This paper describes how an evaluation system can be developed in an institution which will be viewed more favorably by teachers. It is hoped that the ideas and suggestions found in this paper will be of practical value to others interested in a more teacher-supportive approach to evaluation.

Useful work has been done on various teacher evaluation topics describing the features of different models of teacher supervision (Freeman 1990, Gebhard 1990); the application of clinical supervision procedures (Stoller 1996); the use of portfolios as evaluation tools (Bastidas 1997, Brown and Wolfe-Quintero 1997 and Johnson 96); and the value of self-evaluation checklists (Blue and Grundy 1996; Rea-Dickins and Germaine 1990). Each of these aspects of teacher evaluation is, of course, very relevant to the working out of a modern evaluation's. However, what seems lacking in the development of the field at present is:

1. a clear statement of the set of attitudes which will underpin a progressive system attuned to teachers' developmental needs;

2. specific practical guidelines regarding the basis on which teachers should be evaluated;

3. explicit recommendations on how the relationship between supervisor and teacher can be managed successfully; and

4. guidance regarding the introduction and/or development of a revised evaluation system.

While each of these areas will discussed in this paper, my intention is not to put forward a blueprint for some universally applicable evaluation system.

Conflicting Discourses

The apparent reluctance to consider teacher evaluation at the level of practical implementation can be largely attributed to the conflicting discourses and practices which threaten to undermine any evaluation system developed for an ELT program. On the one hand, there is an awareness that the now familiar model of teachers as 'reflective practitioners' (Bardett 1990) should be promoted via the institutions' evaluation procedures. This reflective model of teacher development requires the setting up of pedagogic environments (and by extension evaluation environments) in which teachers are given every encouragement to try out alternative classroom

activities and strategies, assess the impact of these initiatives and reflect on the relationship between their own work and wider educational goals and issues. The aim of such practice is, as Wallace (1991) stresses, to develop describers' capacity for independent inquiry and self-development as professional language teachers. An important dimension of reflective practice is action research. This involves teachers identifying issues and problems relevant to their own classes, experimenting with new or alternative approaches and collecting data relevant to their area of interest. Naturally, any evaluation system established in the context of such an agenda for teacher development and what Bartlett (1990) terms "critical enquiry," would need to be dynamically responsive to teachers' approaches to curriculum implementation and emerging areas of professional interest, both inside and outside the classroom.

However, such a developmentally attuned system would be seen by some to be seriously at odds with a more traditional approach to teacher evaluation built around the cornerstone of formal assessment via observation of teachers' classroom performance at prescribed intervals during the academic year. Observations, as influentially described by Goldhammer (1969), are intended to be collaborative ventures directed towards an analysis of data from the classroom that would relate to a teacher's needs and interests. Above all else, the observation process should be highly sensitive to the teacher's frame of reference and stage of development as a practising teacher. Unfortunately, Goldhammer's (1980) concept of "teacher-initiated" observation and conferencing has been rudely abandoned by many language teaching institutions in recent decades.

Too often, observations rituals are designed to ensure that the teachers' classroom behaviors, methods and modes of interaction with students conform to a fixed, arbitrary concept of what constitutes good language teaching (though the actual criteria by which quality teaching are assessed may not be made fully clear to the teacher via an observation schedule or specific criteria for judging competent teaching). Observations generally tend to reflect the observer's or ELT institution's frame of reference, and fail to take into account the teacher's ideas about the teaching and learning processes, classroom experience, current classroom concerns and particular interests in ELT.

The reality of this evaluation climate will be familiar to readers in different institutions all over the world, as will its negative impact on teachers' professional lives. It is a sad fact that procedures for observation of classroom teaching are all too often viewed by teachers as having more to do with enforcing accepted practice and the authority of superiors rather than encouraging teachers' at different career stages to develop professionally as reflective practitioners. In fact, classroom observation is very often viewed in traumatic examination-like terms by trained teachers in very many institutions because of the perceived linkage between performance during the observation and the offer of contract renewal. As a result, their planning, range of activities, methodology, use of materials and even classroom management procedures may not be typical of their normal performance, or reflect their preferred teaching style and beliefs. Instead, teachers will try to plan a lesson which will give evidence of following methods and classroom management techniques that they believe to be most likely to conform to the observer's (and institution's) concept of the ideal lesson. The lack of reality about such rituals can be farcical as the students' struggle to help out the teacher while trying to cope with unfamiliar tasks, materials, switches of activity and unfamiliar groupings.

Clearly, then, there is a conflict between the two approaches to teacher evaluation outlined above. And these two discourses are reflected in the contrasting roles that supervisors of teams of teachers in major programs around the world are called upon to play as, on the one hand, facilitators of professional development, and, on the other hand, assessors of the quality of teachers' work. What I hope to show in this article, is that these two roles, and the discourses which they spring from, do not need to be constructed so oppositionally and problematically as represented above. In fact, a properly worked out system will establish a connection between the developmental and teacher appropriate dimensions of teacher evaluation that can actually support the work of professionally committed English language teachers.

Multiple Data Sources

If we review the work which has been done in recent years on analyzing approaches to language program evaluation (see, Lynn 1996 and Alderson and Beretta 1992), what is striking is the shift away from evaluations which measure success and make recommendations on the basis of quantitative data (for example, course pass rates) related to a program's own objectives. Instead, we notice a trend towards gathering data about the process of curriculum implementation from different users' perspectives: teachers; students; testing experts, course coordinators; teacher trainers, outside experts etc. The data is collected using a variety of instruments and processes: student questionnaires; teacher questionnaires; interviews with teachers; samples of students' work; teacher diaries; learner diaries; audio tape recordings of lessons; video recordings of lessons; classroom observation reports; interviews with coordinators; interviews with program administrators; careful analysis of teaching materials and curriculum/syllabus documents; reports of testing experts etc.

Such process evaluation methods have important implications for teacher evaluation, pointing to the desirability of accumulating information about a teacher's classroom and other involvements from as many sources as possible. They bring seriously into question the wisdom of evaluating teachers solely on the evidence of infrequent observations when the opportunity exists to gather data about the full range of a teacher's program involvement and professional development activities. The actual list of potential data sources which can be used in the teacher evaluation process will reflect the aims of the program, the experience level of its staff, the quality of management expertise and the time devoted to evaluation in relation to other projects. In the program with which I am currently involved – the English Program of the University General requirement Unit, United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain – the list of data considered to be appropriate to the process of evaluation includes the items in Figure 1 below.

Recording Data

The cornerstone of the data collection process is the action plan in which the teacher succinctly indicates his or her areas of interest and the specific actions planned to achieve those objectives. For example, a teacher might identify one of his/her testing objectives as building rapport with students. Actions planned in relation to this objective might include: meeting on an individual

basis with students, researching their previous academic record, giving individualised feedback more often in class; attempting to gain some knowledge of the students' first language. Other actions would relate to other areas identified, e.g., keeping abreast of current developments in ELT, improving administrative efficiency, developing a more student centered learning environment.

The vital point is that teachers' involvement in the recording of professional activities encourages a higher level of professional engagement. It also raises their awareness of the importance attached by the institution to the different aspects of their professional life: areas of classroom teaching interest; action research projects; curriculum development activities, student support work; running and/or taking part in professional ELT workshops; involvement with professional groups and organizations etc. And as a result, formal observations become less threatening because the teacher realizes that they represent only one (albeit a vitally important one) of many sources of evidence about the quality of his/her work and contribution to the professional life and standards of the language teaching institution.

A culture of teacher-driven evaluation linked to professional development can be more deeply grounded within an institution by encouraging teachers to maintain, as Bastidas (1997) and Brown and Wolfe Quintero (1997) have recommended, a portfolio or professional development folder. This folder is maintained by teachers in order to build up evidence and records of their plans, activities, products and achievements related to the different aspects of their professional work and development. This folder is maintained by the teacher and will contain the types of records which are listed in Figure I . Introduction of this type of recording is a key element in establishing a teacher-based evaluation system.

It is suggested that the combination of a list of possible data source and a discussion of the feasibility of introducing a portfolio dimension into an evaluation system could be vital events in the phasing in of up-to-date evaluation procedures. Professional workshops within an institution will, however, need to succeed in making teachers aware of the benefits of adopting a more active role in the whole evaluation process. Otherwise, there is a danger that the idea of data recording will be seen as simply increasing the teacher's workload and therefore be negatively received. Committed teachers will, however, be quick to see how increased involvement in a program will raise their status, support their professional development and ensure that their contributions are more likely to be recognized.

An initial workshop task that is usually successful with experienced teachers is to brainstorm all the possible data sources for evaluating teachers. Later tasks can be concerned with specifying relevant data, writing guidelines for the contents of portfolios and producing models of key documents, such as a teacher's action plan.

Establishing Effective Supervisory Relations

However, the creation of an educational environment or culture in which evaluation is not perceived as an obstacle to teacher development requires more than reliance on expanded data sources and increased teacher involvement in the process. Such innovations cannot be successful

unless the right professional climate is established among a team of teachers. For that to happen, there must be a fundamental shift of attitudes within an institution. There needs to be a realignment of the traditional top-down, expert-novice relationship between a supervisor/director of studies (or whatever the title given in an institution to the person with prime responsibility for evaluating the quality of teachers' performance) and individual teachers. As Gitlin and Smyth (1989) emphasize, the supervisor needs to move away from what they term the "dominant" view of teacher supervision. This view is associated with the supervisor operating as an "expert," with a mandate to prescribe the features of good teaching and diagnose at the weaknesses of teachers.

Obviously, this approach is unsuited to the needs of a progressive organization which is eager to empower trained teachers to become reflective practitioners, capable, eventually, of independently satisfying the learning needs of their students, developing their own classroom teaching skills and taking a large degree of responsibility for their own professional development. Of course, teachers must be accountable for their classroom work. However, that is a different sort of evaluation requirement to asking teachers who have proved their basic competence as classroom teachers to repeatedly provide evidence of mastery of a whole range of basic teaching techniques. This ritual can be unproductive, even demeaning, and inimical to a more desirable process of supporting teachers' efforts to develop alternative classroom teaching strategies and respond to the immediate needs of tehir students.

A progressive evaluation system can only be established when there is a climate of "dialogial relations" (see Gitlin and Smyth 1989:5) between participants. This system is based on fostering horizontal, rather than top-down interactions between a supervisor and a team of teachers. As Wallace (1991) and Goldhammer (1980) have both emphasized, a positive evaluation climate depends on more collaborative and interactive teacher supervision. Ten features of this more effective style of supervision are given in Figure 2 below.

Developing Procedures

Finally, there is a need in all institutions to ensure that an evaluation is attuned to the teaching culture (the range of teaching behaviours and styles which are generally agreed to have the best chance of success in relation to the curriculum, the socio-cultural classroom context, the characteristics of the student population and the background of the faculty). A transparent and open discussion of key classroom issues and the features of excellent teaching will create the necessary professional common ground needed to be able to identify the developmental objectives of the teacher evaluation process. This can be achieved via the kind of exploitative professional development workshops which take as their starting point the classroom experiences of the teachers working in a program. This will ensure there is no danger that the evaluation system will be based upon the premise of a set of teaching behaviours and classroom features, which though recommended by experts, may not always be relevant to the actual institutional context in question.

I would suggest that an evaluation-oriented series of workshops can first examine the features of excellent practice, and later be directed towards the development of guidelines and observation

schedules which may be needed to monitor the performance of new teachers on entry to an institutional program.

At the U.A.E. University, such a process was initiated recently via the running of a workshop in which participants were given a group task of reaching consensus regarding the ten most essential teacher qualities for someone teaching on the Unit's English Program. The participants were asked to draw up a list of key teacher qualities from a list provided (see Figure 3 below), or to supply others which had not been included. At the report-back stage, commonalties in selections were highlighted and the reasons for different choices were explored.

Identification of agreed core teaching competencies facilitates the later drawing up of documents such as self-evaluation forms, methodology guidelines and observation schedules which are essential pillars of a progressive evaluation system. The actual process of drawing up these documents will, ideally, also take place during professional workshops so as to ensure that they reflect teachers' beliefs, and ensure a vital sense of teacher investment in the new procedures. Further workshops can be directed towards analyzing actual classroom data, such as lesson transcripts/extracts, in order to clarify thinking about alternative strategies for the classroom, and identify the kind of issues which supervisors and teachers might agree to take as a focus during observations: amount of teacher talk; student reaction to tasks; error correction techniques; clarity of instructions and explanations etc.

As already pointed out above, the identification of appropriate issues can be immensely useful in providing a developmental focus for supervision and/or evaluation of teachers who have passed beyond an initial probationary period in an institution, and need a more targeted type of evaluation in order to ensure they develop as reflective, productive professionals.

Conclusion

Evaluation systems are often viewed with trepidation in language teaching institutions. I have indicated in this paper how an evaluation system can be developed in an institution which will be viewed more favourably by teachers. It was suggested that a number of key initiatives are required to establish a more progressive evaluation climate. A case was made for broadening the concept of evaluation to use multiple sources of evidence about a teacher's professional value, so as to counter the negative impact of relying only on summative observations. The importance of establishing an interactive and facilitatory professional relationship between a teacher and his/her supervisor was also discussed.

Finally, the importance of establishing a professional development process in order to introduce new procedures was examined. Hopefully, these ideas and suggestions will be of practical value to others interested in a more teacher-supportive approach to the evaluation of teachers.

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Figure 1
Useful Data Sources for Teacher Evaluation

Teacher's action plan-goals, objectives, and planned projects/ Activities for the term/semester
Oral/written review of progress toward prestated objectives
Results of formal class evaluation of teacher (by students)
Teacher's reports on peer observation experiences
Samples of classroom teaching materials and quizzes produced by teacher
Sample lesson plans
Records of participation in professional development activities
Instruments developed by the teacher to get informal feedback from students on teaching strategies and activities

Figure 2
Features of Effective Supervision

1. Encourages the teacher to identify a particular issue to focus on during an observation.

2. Collects data from the lesson that can be analyzed by both teacher and supervisor, e.g., the time spent on each phase of the lesson, or the type and range of teacher questions.

3. Restricts feedback to agreed areas of focus and carefully selected teaching teaching patterns that might be usefully examined during future observations.

4. Links classroom teaching events to wider ELT and
educational issues.

5. Allows the teacher to try out his/her own teaching strategies and limits criticisms or suggestions before the observation conference.

6. Adopts a perspective on the lesson during observation which takes into account the situation of the teacher and/or the students.

7. Judges the quantity and depth of feedback in relation to the experience of the teacher and his/her ability to benefit from and/or act upon the analysis of particular aspects of teaching.

8. Reinforces effective practices via positive comments so such practices are more likely to become an established part of a teachers repertoire.

9. Uses the lesson as a text to engage in a dialogue with the &teacher about pedagogical issues and to explore classroom teaching options.

10. Sets the agenda and analyzes data collaboratively at all stages in order to develop teachers' confidence and ability to reflect on their classroom practice.

Figure 3
Workshop Task

LIST OF TEACHER QUALITIES
• providing a varied set of learning activities
• presenting language points clearly & interestingly
• maintaining a balance between accuracy-focused & content-focused work
• establishing a good rapport with class/individual students
• relating language study to appropriate cultural and academic contexts
• eliciting students' background knowledge of course texts/topics
• appropriate teacher talk time for activity & course level
• giving students sufficient time to respond to teacher questions
• teaching encouraging students to ask questions
• recognizing student effort/achievement
• taking account of different ability levels in the class
• good classroom organization
• using varied error correction strategies
• use of information gap and other communicative activities
• making clear the pedagogic purpose of activities
• promoting communication between student
• varying the pace according to different lesson stages
• involving students in decision-making
• grouping students appropriately

• giving feedback to students on their progress • good use of whiteboard/audio-visual aids • flexibility in implementation of planned activities • explaining activities clearly • attention to classroom language